



House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Chairman Bob Filner

MEMORIAL DAY UPDATE

Note from the Chairman

It is my hope on this Memorial Day that we, as a nation, remember the words of President Franklin Roosevelt when he said more than a half century ago, "Those who have long enjoyed such privileges as we enjoy forget in time that men have died to win them."

In this time of war, our grateful nation honors the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends and neighbors who have made the ultimate sacrifice. This Memorial Day will take on a more profound and personal significance for many American families this year – those who are mourning the loss of one of their own and those who have loved ones far from home.

Memorial Day is an occasion to honor the memory of the heroes that have served and died in uniform. Our nation has a proud legacy of paying grateful tribute to the men and women who have worn the uniform in defense of this country, those living and those whose memories are steeped in the liberty and freedom we experience today.

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs works hard everyday to ensure that the contributions of our brave veterans are never forgotten. It is the solemn duty of this Committee to make certain that America takes care of her sons and daughters – those that give of themselves to protect the liberties and freedoms we enjoy.

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Memorial Day Talking Points

- For a grateful nation to be truly great, we must continue to build a legacy of honor for our fallen heroes. Although I believe we have made progress fulfilling this legacy, it is my hope on this Memorial Day, that we demonstrate this honor by caring for their comrades and families the whole year through.
- This Memorial Day will take on a more profound and personal significance for many American families this year – those who are mourning the loss of one of their own and those who have loved ones far from home. In this time of war, our grateful nation honors the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends and neighbors who have made the ultimate sacrifice.
- This great nation must recommit to supporting and caring for the more than 1.6 million troops that have been deployed, the 800,000 new veterans of the current conflicts, and the 23 million veterans from previous conflicts.

Veterans' Funding

- This Congress understands that treating our veterans is a cost of war. If we can fund the war, we must fund the warrior. While this Administration continues to ask for billions for the war, it refuses to ask for the necessary funding to keep our promises to our veterans and their families.
- We continue to build on the success of last year's historical funding increase, when Congress voted to increase VA funding by 30%, successfully adding \$12 billion to the baseline of the VA budget.
- The 2009 Budget Conference Agreement increases veterans' funding for 2009 by \$4.9 billion – an 11 percent increase! This landmark budget provides \$3.3 billion more than the President's request and \$39 billion more over five years. The President's budget actually cuts funding after 2009.
- Democrats – THE PARTY OF VETERANS – are committed to addressing the problems caused by years of inadequate budgets. For the second year in a row, the House passed a budget that provides more funding than the request of the Independent Budget!
- **Supporting the troops is our mandate, not just a slogan!!**

G.I. Bill for the 21st Century

- The House passed the supplemental war funding bill which provided our nation's veterans with a modern G.I. Bill that reflects the realities of today's military and meets the rising costs of a college education.
- The post-World War II G.I. Bill created the middle class as we know it – by affording many veterans the opportunity to attend college. Today's veterans deserve access to the same generous G.I. Bill that helped previous generations of veterans readjust to civilian life.
- We need to return to the original goal of the G.I. Bill – and that is to care for our returning service members. When our service members return home, it is our duty to serve them with the same commitment and dedication with which they protected and served us.
- This is our test as a Congress – it is also our moral obligation – to keep the promises that have been made to our veterans.

Housing Needs of Veterans

- House Democrats have forcefully responded to the mortgage and foreclosure crisis that has plagued the economy, and more importantly, personally affected too many veterans.
- Our courageous service members and veterans should never be forced to worry about their homes while they are serving overseas, dealing with the intense stresses of deployment, or returning home and focusing on reintegration to civilian life.
- Congressional Democrats have provided protections to our returning service members and veterans in the most recent housing bill. The legislation prohibits the foreclosure of property owned by a service member for one year following a period of military service and temporarily raises the amount the VA will guarantee when a veteran or service member purchases a home.

Mental Health Care Treatment and Access

- Tens of thousands of service members are being discharged from the military without adequate diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. Soldiers and veterans across this country are not getting the care they need.
- Top leaders at the VA have attempted to manipulate suicide data to portray a lesser problem among our nation's veterans. The Committee continues to provide oversight on the tragic issue of veteran suicide and what the VA is doing to address what is clearly an epidemic. Effective oversight can only work with mutual respect between Congress and the VA – and this Committee will continue to search for the truth.

- Suicide is not a bureaucratic situation that only concerns numbers – this is a matter of life and death for the veterans that have served this country. If we do not admit to the problem or try to understand the problem, then it will continue and we lose these heroes.
- Suicide is the ultimate and tragic symptom of the problem of inadequate mental health treatment for our returning service members and veterans. Other symptoms include post-traumatic stress disorder, homelessness, marital difficulties, homicide, substance use and domestic violence.
- The VA must work with the military to ensure that each and every veteran has access to the support system they need. Our service members ought to have a mandatory and comprehensive evaluation by mental health personnel before each soldier, sailor, airman or marine ends his distinguished military service to this country.

Disability Claims Backlog

- Leadership at the Department of Veterans Affairs has failed to implement a number of informed recommendations on how to improve its claims processing system. We need a Veterans Benefits Administration that provides accurate adjudicated claims and improves the delivery of disability benefits and services in a way that that represents the tremendous sacrifices made by our veterans.
- The Committee on Veterans' Affairs has passed a comprehensive bill to modernize the veterans' claims process. This Committee is dedicating to shaking up a bureaucracy that is looked on as adversarial by many veterans.
- The backlog of claims at the VA totals more than 600,000. Veterans have died while waiting for their adjudication. Veterans have had to give up their homes while waiting on the decisions of their claims. This is a national disgrace!
- Our men and women should not get first-class weapons to fight only to receive third-class benefits after fighting. We must continue on a path to make the benefits provided to our veterans first-rate and uncompromised.
- **The VA should stand for Veterans Advocate – not Veterans Adversary.**



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Update: Funding for our Veterans

Congress has made great strides to provide benefits to the men and women who have defended our nation. For the second year in a row, the House and Senate each passed a budget that provides more funding than the request of the Independent Budget! The House and Senate have convened the formal conference committee to reconcile the House and Senate budget resolutions. The budget resolution for Fiscal Year 2009 is expected to provide 11 percent more than last year and \$3.3 billion more than the President's request to bolster veterans' health care – including mental health, PTSD and TBI – as well as continuum of care issues, VA construction and facility maintenance, and the disability compensation claims process.

In the first year of the 110th Congress, the VA budget was augmented by nearly \$12 billion – a 30% increase to the funding baseline for veterans. Funding for our veterans is finally moving in the right direction – and this is just the beginning of what our veterans need. As the Congress works to increase funding for the VA, the Committee continues to provide vigorous oversight of how these additional resources are spent.

Update: Recently Passed Veterans' Legislation by the House

Legislation to address the health care needs of veterans:

- The Justin Bailey Veterans Substance Use Disorders Prevention and Treatment Act of 2008: To expand and improve health care services available to veterans from the Department of Veterans Affairs for substance use disorders **(H.R. 5554 – Michaud)**
- The Veterans Emergency Care Fairness Act of 2008: To provide reimbursement to veterans enrolled in the VA upon receiving emergency treatment in non-VA facilities **(H.R. 3819 - Space)**
- The Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Facility Authorization and Lease Act of 2008: To authorize major medical facility projects and major medical facility leases for the VA for fiscal year 2009 **(H.R. 5856 – Michaud)**
- Establish the position of Director of Physician Assistant Services at the Veterans Health Administration **(H.R. 2790 – Hare)**
- The Spina Bifida Health Care Program Expansion Act: To provide comprehensive health care to children of Vietnam veterans born with Spina Bifida **(H.R. 5729 – Ellsworth)**

Legislation to increase and improve veterans' benefits:

- Veterans Benefits Awareness Act of 2008: To authorize the VA to advertise in the national media to promote awareness of benefits to veterans (under laws administered by the Secretary **(H.R. 3681 – Boozman)**

- Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2008: To increase the rates of disability compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of certain service-connected disabled veterans, effective December 1, 2008 (**H.R. 5826 – Rodriguez**)
- Require the VA to conduct a longitudinal study of the vocational rehabilitation programs available to veterans (**H.R. 3889 – Boozman**)
- Direct the VA to update at least once every six years the plans and specifications for specially adapted housing furnished to veterans (**H.R. 5664 – Rodriguez**)
- Provide for the protection of child custody arrangements for parents who are members of the Armed Forces deployed in support of a contingency operation (**H.R. 6048 – Turner**)

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs works closely with other committees to champion the needs of veterans and craft legislation to provide for the comprehensive needs of veterans. The House of Representatives recently passed the following bills:

- **H.R. 6081**, Heroes Earnings and Relief Tax Act, expands homeownership opportunities for veterans by making thousands of veterans eligible for low-interest loans by making changes to the qualified mortgage bond programs used to help veterans achieve home ownership. (House Committee on Ways & Means)
- **H.R. 2642**, Emergency Supplemental, contains an amendment to provide modernized and increased G.I. Bill benefits for America's service members and veterans. The House took action to significantly increase tuition assistance, provide a housing stipend, and provide equitable benefits for activated members of the National Guard and Reserves. (House Committee on Appropriations)
- **H.R. 3221**, Foreclosure Prevention Act of 2008, contains two provisions to assist veterans affected by the mortgage and foreclosure crisis. The first provision prohibits foreclosure of property owned by a service member for one year following a period of military service. The second provision provides a temporary increase to VA home loan limits. (House Committee on Financial Services Committee and House Committee on Ways & Means)
- **H.R. 4253**, The Military Reservist and Veteran Small Business Reauthorization and Opportunity Act, expands small business opportunities for veterans and helps military reservists keep their businesses afloat during and after deployment. This bill was signed into law in February 2008. (House Committee on Small Business)

Update: New Laws to Support our Veterans in the 110th Congress

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs has passed important bills that have been signed into law during the first session of the 110th Congress. These new laws honor America's veterans by increasing benefits and improving health care within the VA.

- The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act will offer comprehensive services to veterans, including screenings, counseling and treatment.
- The Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act increases disability benefits for veterans with impaired vision.
- As a result of new laws, veterans were provided a cost-of-living adjustment for disability benefits, the VA Medical Center in Atlanta, Georgia, received approval for modernization

improvements and a number of noteworthy veterans were honored in their local communities.

The National Defense Authorization Act was signed into law in January 2008 and contains provisions to improve the transition from active duty to veterans' status and improve VA health care for returning service members, especially those with traumatic brain injury (TBI) or mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The new law:

- Provides an additional three years of access to free VA health care for returning service members from Iraq and Afghanistan (for a total of five years);
- Improves and expands VA's ability to care for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with TBI, including research, screening, care coordination, and working with non-VA providers to provide the care needed by our veterans; and,
- Allows members of the National Guard and Reserves that are eligible for Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) to use their education benefits for ten years after separation.

Update: Committee Oversight of Veterans' Issues

During the 110th Congress, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs has conducted almost 90 hearings to better understand the needs of America's heroes on a wide-range of topics that affect veterans every day.

Chairman Filner recently held a full committee hearing to learn the truth about veterans' suicides. Lawmakers questioned whether bureaucrats at the Department of Veterans Affairs attempted to manipulate suicide data to portray a lesser problem. Chairman Filner called for VA Secretary Peake to remove Dr. Kussman and Dr. Katz from their positions at the VA for their role in obfuscating veteran suicide data. Suicide is the ultimate and tragic symptom of the problem of inadequate mental health treatment within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Other symptoms include domestic violence, homicide, substance use, PTSD, homelessness, marital difficulties. Chairman Filner will continue to work with Secretary Peake to implement an effective policy to evaluate and diagnose every soldier for post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

Democrats are providing a new direction for veterans by markedly increasing oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs. In the first 100 days of this Congress, serious issues were brought to light regarding the transition of service members from the Department of Defense to the VA. This Committee immediately went to work to examine systematic difficulties in the sharing of electronic patient health information, failure to implement effective patient tracking programs, and a lack of urgency to address and correct these shortcomings.

It is the goal of the Committee to make sure the Veterans Health Administration has the resources to provide timely health care for veterans and that the Veterans Benefits Administration has the resources to provide benefits to our veterans that are first-rate and uncompromised.